



Coraddi



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Coraddi

The Magazine of the Arts at UNCG

Fall 1993

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Cover: **Grant Newton:** *Mushroom Flower*, 1991, sepia tone photograph



Grant Newton: *Untitled*, photograph

Contents

Fiction Contest

- 21 1st Place: *Survivor's Ball, or the Donner Party* by Kelly Link
- 11 2nd Place: *Bridges* by Yulia Borodyanskaya
- 5 3rd Place: *Waiting for Azrael* by Matthew Zeno Wood
- 31 About the Judge

Poetry

- 18 Mary McGahren
- 19 Jason Darden

Art

- 4 Jennifer Garrison
- 10 Terry Jones
- 16,17 Grant Newton
- 18 Roger Jones
- 20 LeAnna Chadwell
- 30 Sylvia Wilkinson

Upcoming Arts Events

- 32 Calendar

Illustrations by Stephanie Shaw, Matthew Curtis, Debbi Crabtree
 Endmark by Andrew Dudek



Jennifer Garrison: *Sleep*, lithograph

Waiting for Azrael

by Matthew Zeno Wood

I've had a lot of friends in my life, but I've always been a loner. It's probably a good thing because otherwise I wouldn't be ready for this. Now I have to be alone. It's not my choice. I can't afford to let anyone get in the way. Some of them might be my friends, but they might be the seeds of my destruction, sown by a bastard too far away to touch. I can already smell it in the air. Something big is about to come down. I feel like a man trying to hold back nightfall with a torch. The light provides some comfort but the night doesn't notice, doesn't care. Torches burn out, the night has time. And when night arrives I can't afford any distractions. And that's all any of them would be. It's the only choice I have; if they tried to help they'd probably end up in the morgue. Sooner or later we all go down among the dead. But then, that's the whole idea. Isn't it?

The sun doesn't shine through my windows anymore, the steel shutters have to stay closed. (He took the sunlight away.) The deadbolt on my door and the motion detectors on the wall are the best my money can buy. It won't be good enough, but I've got to make every effort. I've got to make this as hard for him as I can. When shall we two meet again? I've been waiting since I met my Maker almost a month ago. I'm as ready as I can be, as long as he doesn't decide to back out and do things the easy way. But he won't, he's got his public to think of, his sparkling new career before him. He's going to try and do things right, and I'm waiting for him to try. He's not going to finish me, not him or his fucking angels.

The day that he walked into my office the

weather was perfect, the air was clear, and I thought I actually heard a bird singing over the traffic. I should have realized that something was up right then. Nice days don't come to this city. They have better places to spend their time and only twenty-four hours to do it in. He came in right as I was about to leave for lunch. If I had any luck I would have gotten out of there first, but he would've found me wherever I went. When I think logically, I realize it might be for the best that he violated my office. I haven't been very logical of late.

I heard him whistling as I came down the hall. Mozart's "Requiem" which, in retrospect, would have annoyed the hell out of me if I had known anything about him. My life has taught me to despise and distrust melodrama. Which, of course, is his fault. The whistling stopped as he opened the door, a smile hanging on his face like a sign reading "Break my fingers, I'm a bastard!" He stretched his lanky form into the chair opposite me without waiting for an invitation. He would never need an invitation. He looked like a dimestore dandy: tall, thin, young, dressed in a white suit that went well with his white-blond hair. A solid red tie bisected his chest. But for all his fashion sense he was, somehow, annoyingly unremarkable. Except for his eyes. He had eyes a brave man could never meet, eyes that had seen beyond the skies and reveled in what they found. He didn't frighten me, but his eyes did. And as he focused those eyes on mine, and as I involuntarily looked away, he spoke to me for the first time. "It's good to finally meet you face to face, Mr. Slate." And all the while that smile, an act of sadism in itself,

never left his face.

I matched his smile with a leer of my own. "Good afternoon. You seem to have me at a disadvantage."

He raised an eyebrow in mocking query and said nothing.

"It makes things easier when I know who I'm dealing with," I said, putting on my best "none of this crap now, please" face.

He stared at me, seemingly in wonder. Then, blinking absent-mindedly, he began to gaze about the room. "Does it?" he asked, finally.

"Mister, I'm a busy man. If you want to hire me then talk to me. If you just want to see what a private dick looks like then you can stop by the Pinkerton office on Third Street and look at all the P.I.s you want."

"There are plenty of Pinkerton men in any town. You, on the other hand, are unique."

"And you're pissing me off. State your name and business or leave. I'm hungry, and I don't like crackpots."

"Very well, Slate. Very well." His eyes focused back on my face. The sharp-edged smile fell from his face, exhausted. In its place was a tired smile, small and almost kind. He sighed and reached beneath his jacket's left breast. Reflexively, I reached under my own jacket, expecting to find the butt of my .38. There was no .38, just an empty holster. I kept my hand under my jacket, trusting that he had no way of knowing nothing was there.

The man with

the eyes noticed my reaction and chuckled slightly. He slowly withdrew his hand, holding in it a silver cigarette case. "Surprised that it isn't there, Slate?" I flinched as he snapped open his case. He paused as he lit the cigarette. He inhaled deeply, and sighed in relief. "Egyptian tobacco. My personal favorite . . . oh. Forgive me. I'm a bit distractable sometimes." I realized that my hand was still underneath my jacket, felt silly and pulled it out. "This morning a woman called you and asked for... Roger Atkinson, I believe. Right as you were about to get your gun out from your bedside table. This wrong number got you thinking about how you needed to call up Riley at headquarters before he got off at 8:00. Riley's a talkative fellow, and after fifteen minutes of idle chatter you completely forgot to add that little .38 to your ensemble."

He blew smoke rings as I thought about what he had said, realized how much it disturbed me that he was right on all counts, and wondered why I bothered to get up any more. It was becoming obvious that there was no need to go and search out my own private hell, because it liked me so much it had decided to follow me around. I did my best to look unconcerned. I could tell from his chuckle I failed miserably. I was starting to dislike the smug son of a bitch. Something about him made everything personal.

I smiled, tried to make eye contact and failed. The corners of my mouth twitched. "Nice trick. Should I pick a card now, or do you plan to tell me your name?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Slate, but to tell you my name would be . . . inappropriate. But in these parts I am called Mr. Divine."

I didn't recognize the name. "All right then, Divine. What can I do you for? And please make this fast, I'd like to eat sometime."

He only smiled back at me, unperturbed by my rudeness. "Slate, I am a writer. For the last ten years or so I have been giving the public what it wants. Pulp literature, full of chesty blondes, ugly thugs, and improbably large guns. And recently I realized that I have outgrown this genre, and because of the popularity of my works I can now leave it."

"Must be very nice for you," I commented,



hoping he would get to the point—a point, any point—soon.

"Oh it is, I assure you. But there is still one problem that stands in my way. That problem is you, Mr. Slate. You are undoubtedly the best character I ever created. You're a very popular man where I come from, Mr. Slate."

"How sad that I'm not as popular around here. Now if you'll excuse me, I don't want to keep you sitting here all day. It would be a tragedy to waste any more of your precious time . . ." I stopped. I was about to make a comment about well-dressed fops with delusions of grandeur, and show him (forcefully) to the door, when I realized something unpleasant. I believed him. For some completely ridiculous and incomprehensible reason I believed him, which really annoyed the piss out of me.

I decided I needed to hear what he had to say and sat back down, sliding my blackjack back into its hidey hole. "How did you know about the phone call I got this morning?" I asked, getting a sinking feeling in my gut.

"I wrote it, of course," he replied.

Of course. Birds fly. Bricks are heavy. I wrote your life. Perfectly natural, perfectly obvious. I didn't smile.

"I'll suspend my disbelief for the moment, Divine. What brings you here? Did you just want to see what a nifty little planet you had here and then drop in on your favorite character for tea?"

He raised an eyebrow in comic surprise, as a man unaware of his actions will often do. "No, Slate, I'm afraid my purpose is a bit more . . . grave than that." He paused, chuckling at his own joke as a hungry man might nibble on stale bread. "I've come to talk to you about your mortality, Mr. Slate. About the inevitability of death." He regarded the smoke rising from his cigarette carefully, his face quiet and indifferent.

"Oh. Well, I have nothing against philosophy, D. Is this my moment of enlightenment, then? Is that what brings you here from afar?" I replied. He had my attention now.

He ignored the sarcasm dripping from my voice, or maybe he was too preoccupied with his cigarette to notice. "I suppose you could say that,



Slate. I've been considering discontinuing your series . . . and your character." His eyes followed a smoke ring drifting lazily through the air and watched it die a violent death as it shattered against my coffee mug.

I wondered who could have sent him, but there was no one to send him. No one wanted me dead at the moment, which was fine by me. No one even wanted me scared. I had no old enemies, I had already attended all of their funerals. And he didn't seem dangerous, only immature.

I regarded him carefully, trying to meet his madman's eyes. They burned too brightly, I had to turn away. He believed what he was saying. I was sure of that. And sometimes the ramblings of a stranger have meaning. Perhaps he knew something I didn't, perhaps he was a rich man's kid who had decided to play oracle on his father's fortune. Maybe he got his kicks mystifying bums like me and laughing about it later at his club. Maybe, but I couldn't risk it.

"Discontinue?" I asked, my voice growling in neutral.

He blew smoke out of his nostrils and nodded without smiling.

"You mean I'm going to die?" My voice was soft now, incredulous. I didn't mean for it to be.

"I'm afraid that it's . . ." he started.

"Necessary? Vital to your future?" My mouth smiled, but my eyes didn't. Divine's jaw tightened, and he continued his study of air patterns in the room. His eyes were wide and unblinking, a fish's drowning in the open air. "You're out of your element, D. I don't care that I'm going to die. I've known that for a while now." He scowled, acknowledging my sarcasm for the first time. "If you have

anything useful to tell me, then do. If you know something, if someone put you up to this, then just tell me, please." I brushed a bead of sweat from my brow, a tear from my eye. "Otherwise I don't have time for your mumbo-jumbo. People pay me for my time. If this is all you have then I'm going to have to ask you to leave." I smiled, trying to push my fears away. I don't believe in ghosts or divination, but this frightened me.

"Slate, I know this is disturbing." He turned his five hundred watt gaze toward me. I concentrated carefully on the bridge of his nose. I wasn't turning away again. He leaned forward, a teacher intent on making a slow child understand a lesson. "I created you, and you are undoubtedly my greatest artistic achievement to date. I'm proud of you, of your existence. You've made me fabulously wealthy. I feel I owe you a lot. That's why I'm here today. But all things pass. All things pass in time." He looked for understanding in my eyes and turned away disappointed.

I decided to humor him, to find out if he had anything to tell me. "All right, then. You've come to tell me that you've been getting rich off me for the last decade or so, but now I've become inconvenient so I'm just going to have to go up in smoke." I could feel him watching me out of the corner of his eyes. I tried to jury rig a calm smile. "I can deal with that."

The eyebrow shot up again. "You can? You don't know how relieved I am to hear that." He was still skeptical but his shoulders relaxed a bit. "Slate, it's amazing. You would think that after all this time I would know a bit more about the only real character I ever created. You're unique, Slate, and I don't know why. Every story I've written about you I've had to write around you. I created situations, but I couldn't force you into them. They had to be rewritten, remade until they were as real as you are. I can't live within your limits anymore. I want to create something new. There's nothing wrong with that, is there, Slate?" His eyes captured me. He

wanted an answer from me, he wanted it to be true. "I mean, I know you're unique. This conversation wouldn't be possible if that wasn't true. But you're a pulp hero, maybe the best one ever made, but that's all you are. I want to write something new." He stared at me, pleading for permission I would not give.

I stared back, coming as close to his eyes as I dared. "How does it happen, Divine? How do I die?"

He took a drag off of his cigarette, long and sensuous, and crushed it out on my desk. He stared at the scar it left on the wood, exploring the fresh wound with a skeletal fingertip. His hands shook. "I don't know. I haven't made that work yet. A hero has to die a special death. A villain does, too, but there's something significant about heroes. There's only one way any hero can die. It has

to be noble, shocking, tragic . . . I can't get it right."

I stared at him, his high pale forehead and his shaking fingers. I despised him, his whining and his delusional indecision. A god should be stronger, should be as strong as the eyes promise. He wasn't worthy of those eyes. I felt violated, betrayed.

"Why are you afraid?" I whispered. "Why are you afraid? You're here to kill me." A sneer curled unbidden to my lips. I walked towards him, determined. "You're here to kill me, and you don't even have a plan. You don't even know how. You selfish little bastard! Why couldn't you take control? Why did you bother to come down and walk among mortals when you weren't even sure they existed?" I lifted him from his chair, wrinkling his suit. "You believe what you've been telling me. You think you made me—you think you made a pulp hero." I laughed. "Doesn't that make you a pulp god? I'm not going the way of Holmes and Poirot. Not for you." I stared at his face and felt that terror in his eyes. I hated him even more, the last vestige of his strength was gone. I should have been afraid, not him. I could never forgive him that.

I slammed him against the wall, wincing as the back of his head struck against it. Something



related to a smile twisted across my face. "I think it's time for you to leave." I managed to choke out through my tears. I drove my fist into his stomach, putting my weight into it. He doubled over helplessly, and I knew—I finally knew—there was nothing to him. He was younger, more elastic, but he didn't know what to do or where to start. Gods should be able to win. I drove my knee up into his groin. He wasn't going to kill me, he would never get the chance. He tried to straighten up, but I brought my foot down hard on the side of his knee and it found a new direction to move in. He was crying now, whimpering, whispering something, but I didn't care what. I picked him up, one hand at his collar and one hand at his belt, and raised him above my head. He stopped crying, stopped whispering, stopped breathing. We both knew what came next. The plate glass shattered as I threw him against it, his arms spread wide. He didn't scream, he didn't say a word as he plunged fourteen stories toward the street below. I leaned out after him, watching to see the pavement drive his head up into his stomach, tiny diamonds raining down beside him in celebration.

He wasn't there. There was nobody, just an empty sidewalk below. I hoped to God that I was insane, that I had just thrown the telephone out the window in a hallucinatory fit. Then they could lock me away and give me electric shocks while I claimed to be Noah Webster. I could deal with that reality. I left early, my head shaking. I stopped and got a bottle for company. I needed another one when I came in at noon the next day. I found a solid window where broken shards had been before. The scar on my desk had decided to stay. Then I finally knew, I understood that I had been wrong. I had missed my shot at him and somewhere beyond all distance my ever so beneficent and thoughtful creator is finding the perfect death for me. That's why I'm alone. It's safer for all concerned, and I won't let him hurt me through them. I've spent almost all my savings on security equipment, and I've even gotten ahold of some military hardware in case I see it coming. And of course I've had to invest in some drugs. Coffee isn't enough to keep me up, and I've got to stay awake. I can't afford sleep with those eyes watching me. So I've switched to

amphetamines. Designer stuff an acquaintance of mine got for me. They're damned effective. After the first week my temples were pounding and my ears were bleeding. He assures me they're not addictive. I'll be off them as soon as all this is over. Riley shouldn't be worried about me. I'm sure zero hour is approaching soon, and I won't be caught in my sleep. After that I'll be fine again. There's no reason for them to worry about me. It'll be done soon. Everything will be fine.

I do have one advantage. I know he wants me to die a hero's death. He won't let me die in anything as simple as a car crash or a thunderstorm. He wants to do this right. He wants to strike me down with an angel instead of the invincible hand of God. And I know he'll wait until I take a case. He could only get a good story out of a case.

So I'm waiting for Azrael, whatever form he takes. I've got to build a fortress that can postpone the swing of the scythe, that can withstand the blows of the hammer of God. I wonder where the anvil is? I've got to be ready to grapple with the Angel of Death, because I'm not about to let that child have the satisfaction of watching me die. My hands shake, and I stumble too often. But I can't sleep yet. It's only been three weeks. I'll meet him with eyes open, my brain past the kindling point. He will not face a man, but a man afire. But I'm waiting. I've been waiting so long . . . how long will it be before I look into his—what color were they—those eyes again?





Terry Jones: *Untitled*, photograph

Bridges

by Yulia Borodyanskaya

His labors were numerous—a man with “Golden Hands” was the nickname that followed him around in the familiar circles. In times of stagnation and continuous political earthquakes, there was nothing more permanent and reliable than his handyman’s skills.

Evgeny belonged to the generation of the sixties. In his home country this decade was legendary for its enthusiasm and liberated creativity; it was as if all people took a deep breath of fresh air and learned to love life anew, after years of Stalinism and brutal extermination. Anything felt better after that.

In a rattling old car Evgeny cruised around the dusky streets of the old city, searching for an occasional rider, humming a long forgotten revolutionary march. He would go on these long rides almost every night, hoping to pick up a few passengers. It was never easy to catch a real taxi cab on the deserted streets of the city. This picking up a little money on the side was a real help for his growing family. And it was within Evgeny’s authority to help.

The streetlights gave off a blurred flickering light that reflected in the puddles of rainwater sloshing under the wheels of the car which resonated from the jerky stumbling over the potholes of the distorted asphalt.

At the poorly lit intersection ahead of him, Evgeny distinguished a shapeless silhouette waving in the direction of approaching cars, welcoming them to stop. As Evgeny drove closer, he decided to slow down.

Many strangers opened the dented door of his car, but there were certain categories of people which he tried to avoid—aggressive drunkards, suspiciously dressed women, and gypsies. He could not figure out who it was this time, but as he gazed through the weepy side window blind with rain, he knew who was his guest.

She fought with her numerous shawls for a while, trying to get them all in, and then slammed the door shut. The light turned green and Evgeny moved on.

His quiet passenger turned out to be a young woman with messy black rain-drenched hair, cloaked in colorful garb, with big hoop earrings of gleaming fake gold: a gypsy without disguise.

“Where do you need to go?” Evgeny inquired, slightly irritated because of breaking his unwritten rule—never to give a ride to gypsies. The girl was silent—a sigh of indecisiveness, but after a while breathed out wearily: “Just the nearest metro station, dear.”

This casual “dear” was a common way for the gypsies to address passers-by on the crowded streets of the city. They travelled from town to town, wandering nomads who never had a place to live or certain occupations, making the ends meet by begging and fortune-telling.

In Evgeny’s eyes they were like a plague, something hard to get rid of, a remnant of previous civilizations scattered throughout Europe. He forgot all the romance that he ascribed to their tribal life when he was a young boy. Stealing of horses, the sounds of tambourines and dancing around the

bonfire belonged to the bedtime stories that he told to his little girls. In reality, city gypsies were like never-healing sores on the face of the familiar streets: no one could run away from the harsh contrast between the uplifted beauty of the Renaissance architecture and crawling poverty of these wandering brightly clad folk.



"Let me tell you your fortune, dear. Don't you want to know what you should be happy about? Dear—my-dear, just give me your hand—you'll learn when not to miss your fortune! Don't let your luck fly by, dear." They were near the metro, and all Evgeny wanted was to get the girl

out of his sight. He grew more and more superstitious as the time went by, and now believed that fortune-telling could bring him bad luck. But the girl obviously was not going to pay, and offered her simple magic instead. Looking into her dark eyes with premature webs of wrinkles around them, he agreed.

Evgeny drove away from the busy night traffic, into a pocket of dead end street in between two old houses with unlit windows, and came to a stop. "Just give me your hand," she repeated.

He stretched out his calloused hand with the top joint of one finger missing, and with the black scar of an electric chainsaw cut across the thumb-nail: the dues he paid for making iron doors in his basement workshop.

The girl was not revolted, not even surprised; she nearly grabbed his hand and opened up the palm, placing it in the cradle of her own small hands that looked unprotected, peeping from under the fuzzy fringe of the black flowered shawl. He looked at the milky white crease running across her head, where the hair parted in the middle and fell in tangled waves on both sides of her face. Her weather-bitten lips were moving in some kind of silent spell, while she stared thoughtfully at his palm, holding it closely and carefully with both hands, as if it was made out of some fragile material.

"You are a good man," she spoke finally.

"You are a strong man, too. But you are getting old. Do you see the line of life here, running across your palm? It is not going to run for much longer. Don't be sad, dear. There is much luck ahead of you, you are doing everything right. Only listen: don't forget to build a house."

She smiled, looking up at his face for the first time. Then gracefully, with ease, she threw her hair back, gently opened the tight door, and stepped out, diving under one of the arches in the labyrinth of the dark hollow back yard.

At home Evgeny was greeted by the neurotic high-pitched barking of his wife's lap dog. Smells of cooking, dust, damp laundry attacked his nostrils without giving him time to adjust from the rainwashed breeze of the night city. But after all, it was home, his family had lived in this nine-story apartment building from the time he got married. Although then, thirty years ago, he was hoping to find a better place for his wife and growing daughters. To them he wanted to give the best, create or build it with his own hands, if he could not afford it. But moving from one apartment to another could turn out not for better, but really for worse.

"Dinner is ready, Dad! Come on, don't let it get cold." Olga, his younger daughter, was maneuvering with the hot pan around the small kitchen, avoiding the sharp corners of the refrigerator, kicking the dish with dog food under the sink—out of her way.

Evgeny gave up on trying to get off the glue that smeared his hands with dirty brown blotches. He soaped again, but the traces of his day's work did not wash off.

He gorged on his food without letting it cool down; too busy to eat during the day, he was sick with hunger. Olga sat across from him at the lacquered table, his last year's accomplishment. She was sipping hot tea with the remains of honey which she scraped out of the sticky glass jar, pausing to lick her fingers thoroughly. Evgeny chewed on his buttery spaghetti with sausage, glancing at his daughter with a humorous smirk.

"How is Mom?" he asked.

"She was not feeling well and went to sleep. Oh, she asked me to tell you to wake her up when

you come home. It is after eleven o'clock. You should know better than coming home so late."

Evgeny did not want to argue with Olga. What for? Ever since she started college, she felt inadequate and very unhappy with her parents. They could not afford to let her move out, and so they all stayed in this small two-room apartment, along with his wife's dog, elderly white cat (half-blind, too), and Olga's hamster. It was quite a household, never quiet, always ready for a feud. So different from what Evgeny wanted it to be. . .

For years to come Evgeny would remember the time when his little girl, Olga, was growing up, his happiest time, he thought. Then Tatyana, his wife, still resembled the gentle romantic heroine from Pushkin's famous poem. Her girlish innocence gave her a special glow of charm and simplicity. She wore her mini dresses and put her hair up, opening little seashells of ears for everyone to admire her natural grace and perfection, almost excusing herself for being so pure and radiant, continuously smiling.

That year Evgeny changed his mind about becoming a historian, and went to the professional school instead of the university, to become a diver and build bridge constructions under water. He always dreamt of building bridges over the numerous rivers and canals of his city.

He married early. Tatyana and he eloped soon after they got acquainted, but there was not anyone from Evgeny's side of the family to approve of this marriage. His father left them soon after Evgeny was born, and his mother and older brother drowned in the lake in the outskirts of the city. Their boat began to leak halfway toward the shore.

Tatyana never said anything to her husband, but it always seemed strange to her that he chose to be a diver: she would never come close to water after the drowning of her parents.

His diving years were long past now—they did not let one go underwater after he turned forty-three. Evgeny spent his days in the workshop, repairing boats for his friends, and picking up late night city hitchhikers.

Evgeny always hoped to have a son, but

Tatyana gave birth to two lovely daughters, Katya and Olga. Several years ago Katya left them: moved to another city to live with her husband, the Navy officer. But his youngest, Olga, stayed. And no matter how much she wanted to get away, her father secretly wished that she would never leave.

As a little child, Olga was cheerful and happy as a singing bird. Her little feet left their trace in every garden and every park of their big, busy city. Evgeny liked to think of her childhood as this endless walk that they took, going from one park into another, leaving sand figures and hiding flowers under the green pieces of broken glass—their secret conspiracy against the inevitability of change in this world.

Now this glorious walk was over. The sunny afternoon faded into the dusty evening, and the fountains in their gardens got turned off for the fall, statues hidden in the coffin-like wooden boxes, protection against the snow. And Olga grew up.

Evgeny and his daughter still lingered at the kitchen table for a while, avoiding the chores they had to complete before calling the day off. Evgeny stirred the fifth teaspoonful of sugar into his bottomless cup of strong minty tea; sugar was not something he could ever cut back on.

"Imagine who I talked to today." He felt a strong urge to tell Olga about his uncommon encounter. If anyone, she should understand.

Olga listened quietly, so much unlike her, who always tried to interrupt her dad's storytelling with fireworks of questions and comments. When Evgeny told her about the gypsy's strange reminder (Don't forget to build a house.) Olga smiled and nodded with enthusiasm. "Weren't you going to start building one anyway, Dad? I have heard you mention it very often, especially lately."

He looked at Olga with a feeling of strong reassurance. The decision had finally been made. "So, Olga, have you got any plans for Christmas break?" he winked at her conspiratorily.

A bad cold and lots of housework kept



Tatyana from going to the village with them. At least that was how she explained her determination to stay at home, in the still unchanging safety of her little kingdom: her dog, her knitting machine, her detective stories and crossword puzzles. Evgeny often wondered, why she never took the books off the shelves of their well-organized home library. Katya even card-catalogued them, to make sure that everything stayed intact.

Tatyana promised to come visit Evgeny and Olga by New Year's, driving to the village with a bunch of close friends. Originally, the old Russian log house standing on the hill in the small village, surrounded by a vast kitchen-garden, was a part of Tatyana's legacy. But she preferred the conveniences of the city life to the troublesome labors of the village—very understandable, especially if one ever tried to be a full-time housekeeper. And after her parents died, she quit going there even for summer holidays. Tatyana generously left all the fun of it to Evgeny, who liked to dig in the dirt, grow potatoes, and fix old, rotting things.

Evgeny knew that the old house was no good anymore. One did not have to be a certified carpenter to notice how it hopelessly keeled over to one side. It was like a big brown bear who reached out for wild raspberries in the woods, and suddenly was frozen by a wicked spell, ready to fall over anytime.

It was not that long ago when this old hunchbacked building was full of life. During summers, Evgeny would hear rowdy noises of his daughters and other kids at play. They inhabited the big house from the basement to the attic, exploring every corner of it. Then they would run outside, a whole flock of flickering bare feet, and scatter around the garden, attacking the beads of young curling pea vines. They did not even bother to peel the pods, but ate them whole, biting into their tender sweetness. His little Olga was a natural leader of these raids.

Now the garden was taken over by weeds, the old apple trees remained untended, and the house—dusty and accusatory, its windows half-broken by naughty village boys.

It took Olga and her father a while to make the house livable for the winter. A lot of wood had

to be burned in the brick and clay stove to melt the intricate hieroglyphic scriptures of snow on the insides of the frozen windows. By midnight there still was a whiff of moldy cold haunting the room.

Olga took over the kitchen: rinsed the mugs and brewed some tea. There was a day of work ahead of them, and they did not want to break the silence of this desolate place with too much talking.

Next morning felt like a Christmas fairy tale. The creamy whiteness of deep snow was distracted only by dark still figures of naked trees and a few log houses, much like the old hunchback, that crowded the picturesque group on the hill. The frost conserved the fragrance of the pine needles, reaching out from the woods. Fluffy snowflakes were waltzing silently. And silently, in Evgeny's heart nestled the hope that in the new house Olga's childhood and his life would be continued and prolonged beyond mortality.

"The hardest thing is to get started," encouraged Evgeny, sensing Olga's doubts in the possibility of their venture. She was staring at the magnificent pine trees with trunks so wide it would take her three times to go around them in the imaginary embrace.

Their first task was to put several trees down and drag them on the sledges to their property. Olga felt relieved that the woods were so close, only a couple of minutes away from the old house.

Pushing and pulling on the hand saw, Olga discovered how yielding the wood is, if one chooses the right angle and establishes a regular pace. They awakened the woods, and when the tree slowly started falling down, they heard cracking and clapping and a soft sighing of the feathery snow under the heavy weight of the fallen pine.

Olga stayed in the village only for a week. She had "something going on" with one of the grad students at school, and Evgeny let her go, still not without regret. It was hard to see her grow out of childhood, every moment of which he cherished.

He did not give up on his building, and by the end of that winter the whole foundation of the big new log house was finished. Evgeny elevated it on the rocks, placed at each corner, so that the spring floods of melting snow would not wash his con-

struction away.

Being back in the city, he anticipated every weekend when he could continue his work on the house. Weekdays drifted by, with occasional quarrels and silent confrontations: his wife declared a war against his obsession with building, and she still would not come along with him. She could not understand how all her hearty meals, all her care and loyalty that she generously provided him with, was less important than a useless house in the middle of nowhere. But Evgeny went on with his work.

That spring Olga avoided her parents' apartment more and more often, and at the end of May she announced her engagement to the grad student, Dmitry. Their wedding was planned for the middle of August.

Evgeny insisted on driving the newlyweds from the City Hall to the restaurant, where the whole party was going to meet for the celebration. His old car, modestly embellished with bright ribbons, looked shabby in comparison to some of the guests' imported models. It also would not start, so Olga in all of her bridal adornment, stood next to her dad and groom, who squatted close to the car, checking the engine. As Evgeny glanced at her apologetically, he was met by Olga's encouraging smile and a kiss that she blew at him along with the cigarette smoke. Finally, they got into a car and Evgeny hurried to catch up with the party, driving along the familiar river embankment, going over the curved backs of the small bridges. In a flashback of unexpected reminiscence he felt Olga's excited tap on his shoulder and then an outburst of laughter. She loved to ride with him as a little girl, and always asked to go over those little bridges. She said it gave her goose bumps. And this time when he secretly glanced at her, he noticed a quiet smile that forgot to leave her curved plump lips.

As they were getting closer to the restaurant, they had to drive through an old park. Evgeny got lost trying to choose the right alleyway. "Go straight, Dad, past the lake," Olga reminded him. "We have been here before. Don't you remember?"

Going slowly so that he could give way to the pigeons who were crossing the road left and right, without any fear, Evgeny found his way out of the

park, straight into the traffic jam of downtown.

"Dmitry and I are going to help you build the house, Dad, right after our honeymoon," Olga said plainly. "Would that be OK?"

"It will be a dream come true, dear," answered Evgeny.

When they were almost there, a couple of blocks away from the restaurant, he spotted the group of gypsies who were dance-walking along the pavement, facing the approaching traffic. One of the girls slipped out of the group, she probably lost her sense of direction in the whirlpool of dancing. She could have been run over by Evgeny's car; luckily, he slammed the brakes just in time.

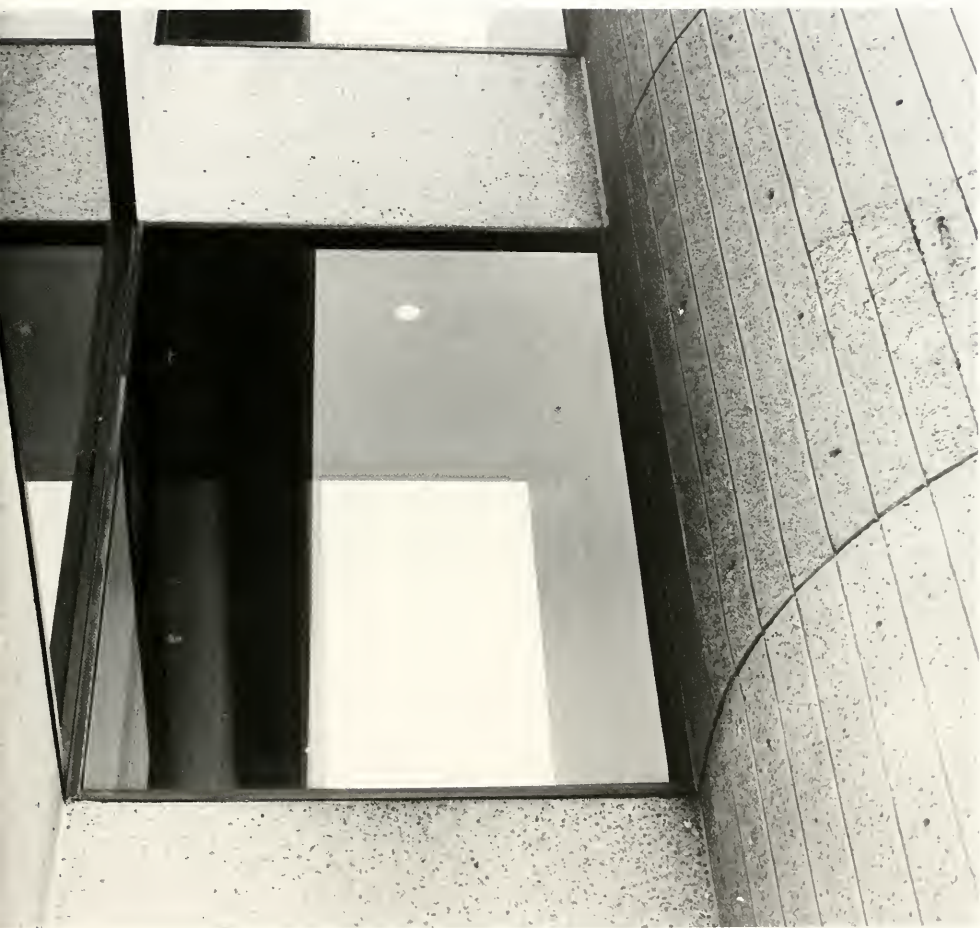
In a slow motion, he saw her familiar eyes looking at him, signing a quick apology through the front-view window, and then smiling in recognition. He could see her lips move in mute "Let me tell you your fortune, dear." But this time he just nodded his refusal, and moved on.

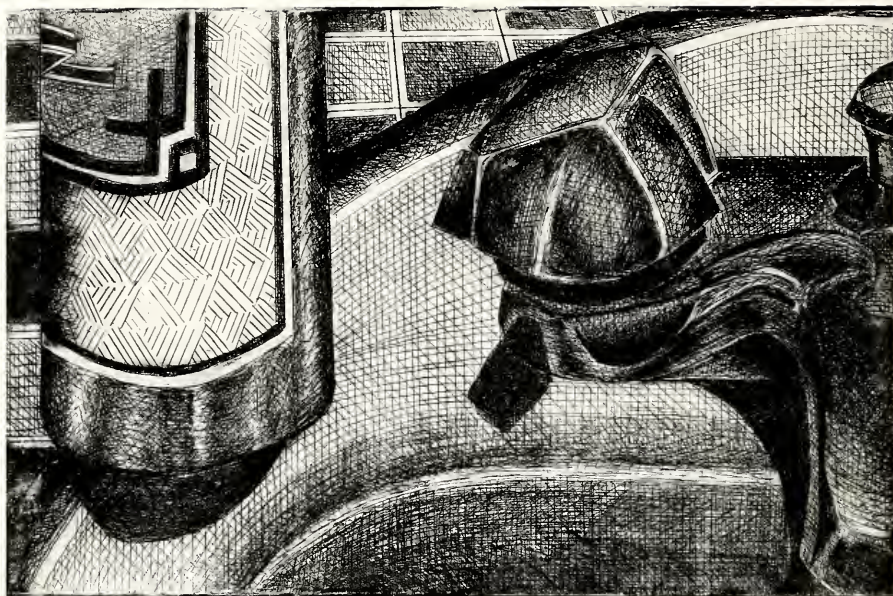
This time he knew his luck.





Grant Newton: *Rotation #2*, photograph





Roger Jones: *Untitled*, lithograph

X Thousand Dead on the Front

by Mary McGahren

Nobody knows the whereabouts
of the sea-monsters that have eaten
our gun-bearing children;
the oxen relentlessly chewing
thin cemetery grass;
or the bodies, already plunged
into the boiling soup
of enemy kitchens.

I want an answer
for the million strange heads
that ask
over and again,
blindly, without tact,
"Where have the archaic deities gone,
and the legendary ruins of Greece?"

Eureka Springs

by Jason Darden

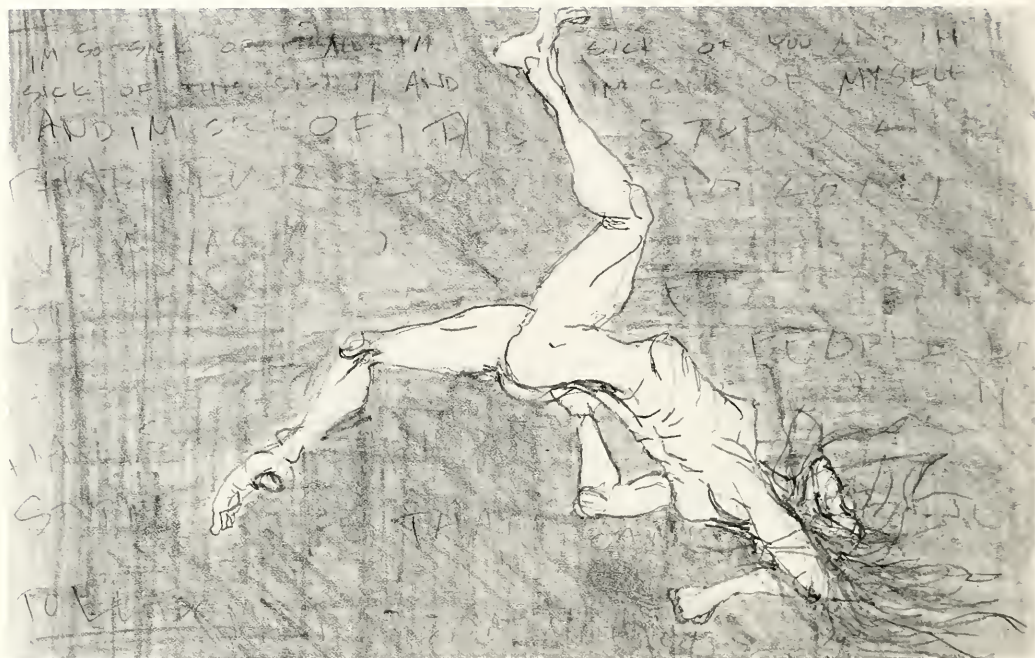
Jesus and I cut
grass one summer
to pay for the
window

Jesus broke when
we played ball
behind Mr. Cotton's
Shop-n-Sav.

I remember Jesus
commenting on the
misspelling of save
just before
the ball escaped
into the back window.

"Jesus," Jesus said
and we scattered home
only to find
God waiting at the
front door.

I bet Mr. Cotton
called him.



LeAnna Chadwell: *Untitled*, graphite

Survivors' Ball, or the Donner Party

by Kelly Link

They had been travelling for three days together in Jasper's rented car when they came to the dark mouth of the tunnel into Milford Sound.

They drove down the Avenue of the Disappearing Mountain, past Mirror Lakes, through leafless groves of wineberries, supplejacks, and sword-like cabbage trees. As they approached Homer Tunnel, the landscape altered. It seemed to Jasper that they had passed from autumn directly into the cold heart of winter. The road circled up between cracked grey boulders, neatly halved by sleet and thaw. The only colors were silvery lichen, white snow, and the dye-vat deep blue of the sky.

They had been late leaving the youth hostel in Te Anau because Serena slept past noon, and then she thought she might like a shower. There was no hot water left, but she spent a long time in the bathroom anyway, writing in her journal. She didn't like tea, so Jasper went to the corner dairy to buy a cocoa mix, and some painkiller for his wisdom tooth. Then, before they left Te Anau, she made him stop at a pub for a ploughman's lunch with a couple of pints of bitter. Jasper couldn't eat, but the bitter worked to numb his mouth where the aspirin had failed. In consequence one or the other had to stop every fifteen minutes for the loo. The sun was settling down ahead of them.

Serena had not stopped talking since Jasper had picked her up in Queenstown. "Rather strange," she was saying now, "to name a child after a semi-precious stone. Why not Ruby, or Pearl?"

Jasper looked over at her. The short, stubborn upper lip no longer enticed. It only met its

fellow in order to part again in a continuous waterfall of words. He was beginning to suffocate in the soft drawl of American (so welcome at first, after a diet of weeks on clipped New Zealand vowels and swallowed consonants.) The long, dirty legs in their torn jeans shifted restlessly on the seat beside him. Like the lilies of the field who do not spin or toil, Serena neither offered to pay for gas, nor did she bathe very frequently.

"Those are women's names," he said. "My parents liked the sound of Jasper."

"Rasp, hasp, clasp her, Jasper," Serena said. Her fingers drummed on the dashboard. "I suppose it does have a nice sound. Much better than sheen, green, mean Serena."

She pulled a notebook out of her knapsack, and began scribbling the words down. Jasper had been amused and then alarmed when he realized that she only stopped talking in order to write. He had never travelled with a poet before—for that matter, he had never travelled with anyone who talked so much. And bathed so little.

"Cleaner," he said. "Please don't put me in a poem, Serena. It seems too much like literary cannibalism. Do you always devour your travelling companions?"

"They never seem to mind too much," Serena said. She put down the pen. He looked at it. It was a rather nice pen. His grandmother had given it to him as a graduation present, and he had lent it to Serena in the bar in Queenstown where they had met. She hadn't given it back yet, although he had bought her a ballpoint at a chemist's the next day.

He'd also bought her a toothbrush and a box of a dozen Durex condoms.

They hadn't seen a single car, coming or going, since they'd left the main road and headed for the pass into Milford Sound. After enduring ominous weather reports all the way from Queenstown to Te Anau, he wasn't surprised. Alone, he would have headed up the east coast towards Dunedin, rather than making the long drive into the West and Fiordland, but Serena had a great desire to see Milford Sound, and he was quickly learning that Serena was seldom thwarted in her great desires.

"Spleen," he said. "Queen." He wished that the radio would come on again. The reception had been limited to one local station only, and that station had been particularly limited to coverage of one story. A party of day trekkers on the Milford Track had been missing for nearly a week now. The path between Dumpling and Doughboy Huts had been washed out, with them upon it. Then a series of brief but vicious snowstorms had cut them off from rescue efforts. Now one of the rescue teams was missing as well.

The Track was clear again as was the road into Milford, but rescue party and trekkers had yet to return. And Jasper was displeased to discover that the higher they climbed, the more his tooth hurt. Or maybe the alcohol was wearing off.

The drifts of snow on either side of the road reached up to the height of a tall man, and the thermometer stayed stubbornly at 12 degrees Celsius, despite the heater's best efforts. This was unpleasantly cool, but the engine was running hotter than it should have been. Jasper would have liked to pull the car over to the side of the road, to relieve his aching bladder as well as to rest the engine, but every 500 meters they passed black and yellow signs reading: "DANGER!

AVALANCHE AREA: DO NOT STOP VEHICLE!"

All day the sky had been the color of a blue china plate, flat and suspended upon the narrow teeth of the white mountains. The road wound precariously between the mountains, and the car threaded the road. The car moved westward as did the sun, but all day the sun had gone blazing before them. Now it seemed they would arrive together upon the upward spike, one sliding down, the other climbing up the side of the snowy bowl. Just where the road seemed about to lift over the broken rim, there was a black pinprick marking the tunnel into Milford Sound. As Jasper watched, the pinprick became a door, and the door became a mouth that ate up first the road and then the rental car.

Serena was reading out of Jasper's guidebook. "Started in 1935," she said, "it took twenty years to complete.

"Homer Tunnel passes through 1.2 kilometers of solid rock. It is 1.2 kilometers long. Four men died in rock falls during the excavation," she said. "Turn on the headlights—here we go."

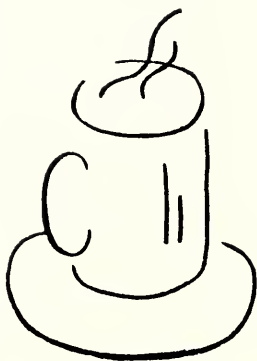
They went from the pink-grey of the sunlit snow drifts up into sudden dark. The headlights were sullen and small reflecting off the black swell of the tunnel walls. The walls were not smooth; they bulged and pressed against the tarmac road like the sides of a living animal.

"The gradient is one in ten," said Serena. "That's like walking up a staircase."

In the headlights, the walls ran with condensation. Jasper could hear the sussurating stream even over the noise of the car. The tunnel magnified the sound of the struggling engine. A small whine of pain in Jasper's skull became a shriek, broadcasting out of his jaw.

The car was moving very slowly, about 25 km per hour against the endless upward tilt. Jasper could feel the walls pulling back at them, and he downshifted again.

"It's like being swallowed," Jasper said. The terrible weight of the mountain above him, the white snow on the black mountain, all pressed down slowly and inexorably upon him in the dark. He sunk like a stone in a cold well, the great forces bearing down from all sides, then pulling him in all directions like the surge and tow of an ebon tide.



This ache centered in his wisdom tooth.

The car seemed to move more and more slowly; the weight grew more and more unbearable.

"Not at all," said Serena. "It's like sex."

She looked at him sidelong, and her gaze was a new pound of pressure. He couldn't bear the black eyes in the white, white face. "Are you all right?"

He shook his head. "Claustrophobic," he managed to say. He could hardly keep his foot on the gas pedal. In his mind the car spun through the dark, coming through to the other end of the tunnel, and there he imagined a black wall, a frozen door of ice.

And then he had to stop the car. "You drive," he said, and he fumbled the door open and went reeling like a drunkard to the passenger's door.

Serena crawled over to the driver's side, and he sat down in her seat. It took all his strength to shut the door again, against the contrary tug of the tunnel.

"Hurry," he said.

She drove competently, talking at him the whole time. "You might have said," she said. "Lucky for you I can drive stick. We should be out soon."

They came out into night. The sun had gone down in the space that they had been inside the mountain, and now there was nothing to distinguish one darkness from the other but dirty snow in the headlights. Jasper felt the great clinging weight fall away from him instantly. His tongue went up to touch his broody tooth.

"Stop the car," he said.

He lurched out a second time, and was sick kneeling by the side of the road. When he stood up, his knees were wet with melted snow. He was still for a moment, and when he was sure that he would not throw up again, he knocked on the driver's window. "I think I'm all right again," he said. "Let me drive."

Serena shrugged. "If you're sure," she said. "I can't see that well anyway. It's about another 45 minutes to the hotel. There's only one, you know."

They drove in silence for a minute. The landscape had changed again. On this side of the

tunnel, there were shoulder-tall ferns, fanning out lush and black in the headlights. There were evergreens, their branches reaching out over the road. Under the tires of the car, iced pinecones shattered noisily. The road was steeper, circling down this time.

Serena said, "I can't imagine that we'll have any trouble getting a room."

Jasper said, "You mean you didn't book one? You said you called and made a reservation."

Serena grimaced. "Can I turn on the light for second? I want to write something down."

She reached for her notebook, and said reluctantly as she wrote, "Yes, well I got through, but they said there weren't any rooms available, and there is a youth hostel, but it's only open during the summer and autumn. Isn't that odd? It's July and it's winter and everything's closed."

"Besides," she said. "I wanted to go, and there will probably be some cancellations. They won't turn us away, we'll tell them you've been sick."

Jasper stopped the car. He leaned his head against the steering wheel. Serena said, "This is the third time you've stopped. We're never going to get there."

She snapped her notebook shut.

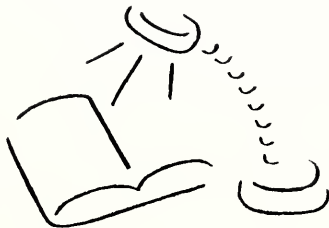
"Goddamn it, Serena," he said. "If I didn't think some other unfortunate driver would stop and pick you up, I'd throw you out of the car this very instant. I'd piss on your notebook, and leave you to be devoured by wolves. Then I'd turn around and drive back to Te Anau."

"There are no wolves in New Zealand," Serena said. "The only native mammal is the bat."

"You ignorant, stuffed shirt," she added.

"Then I'd leave you to be carried off by rabid bats."

She folded her arms around her knees, and snapped her teeth at him the way she snapped her notebook. "You didn't have to come," she said. And then she said, "Anyway you wouldn't get back through the tunnel. Not without me to drive." The weight fell back upon him. "I know," he said,



and started the car again.

"Where are we going?" she said.

"To the hotel," Jasper said. "And perhaps they won't be full, and perhaps they'll still be serving dinner. And perhaps I'll leave you here tomorrow, and drive back through the tunnel in daylight."

Serena folded her arms around herself. "That's fine with me," she said. "You know, you're not exactly the perfect companion yourself. Your breath smells like vomit and you drive like a turtle."

She glared at him, and continued. "Not to mention all those significant, let's ignore Serena silences, and your man-on-top, dick-in-the-hole, two-and-a-half minutes and we're done, ready or not, here I come. I like a bit more finesse."

His tooth gave a great leap of pain. "I think," he said carefully around the ache, "you're telling me that you just fucked me to get to Milford. Just because I have a car."

This time she didn't say anything at all. Instead she walloped him, catching his jaw precisely below the misery of his abscessed tooth. The blow so surprised him that at first he was more concerned for her hand than for himself. It took the new pain a second to travel down from his brain back to his jaw, and then his toothache sang out in a profane doubled chorus. He howled and slammed on the brakes.

Serena, who was not wearing a seatbelt, fell forward, knocking her skull loudly against the dashboard. After a moment, during which neither of them were capable of speech, he said, "Are you all right?"

She sat up, gently touching her hand to her forehead. "My hand hurts," she said. "And my head. This is the fourth time."

Jasper said thickly, "You should never tuck your thumb into your fist when you punch someone. This is the fourth time what?"

"This is the fourth time we've stopped," she said. "Your mouth is bleeding. Here."

She took a dirty Kleenex out of her knapsack and licked it. Then she applied it to his lower lip. "Sorry," she said. "Three days is about my limit for traveling with someone I'm not related to. We'd better hurry up and get to the hotel."

"Before the car breaks down, or it starts to

snow and we get stuck together for any longer," Jasper finished for her. He was talking through the right side of his mouth. "You drive the rest of the way. My tooth hurts."

Serena's eyes widened, and she clapped her hand to her mouth. "Your tooth!" she said.

"It doesn't matter," he said wearily. "Just drive."

Milford Sound carves 22 km inward, like a dropped boot. Its heel points north, kicking exuberantly at the great belly of the South Island. Water from the Tasman Sea fills the boot, cool and greeny-sleek. Abel Tasman, the first Pakeha to set foot on shore, sailed away again after several of his crew were cooked and eaten. He left behind him Breaksea Sound; Doubtful and George Sounds; Milford Sound, which is now accessible by sea, by air, by foot, or along the Milford Road by car, through Homer Tunnel.

The THC Milford Hotel is a white, two-story colonial building. It has a veranda that runs all the way around the first story, for warm weather use in December. From the front bedrooms, guests have a double view of the black, stony-crowned mountain known as the Mitre. It rises up from the Sound 1,695 meters, and sinks back down to greet its own image in the looking glass water. At the back of the hotel lesser mountains march down to a flat meadow, where Donald Sutherland, the Milford Hermit, is buried. On one side is the end of the Milford Road, and on the other side is the beginning of the Milford Track.

There is a small guest parking lot, and to Jasper and Serena's dismay, it was nearly full when they pulled in. As they got out of the car they could hear the sound of a band, and they could see through two open windows into a long, elegant dining hall. There was a great host of people, some dancing and some sitting at small tables.

The song that the band was playing was "Slow Boat to China." They could hear it, as well



as the sound of wine glasses chiming against each other, knives skittering across dull forks, all this through the two French doors that stood open to the veranda, to Jasper and Serena as they stood there, and to the mountains behind them.

Jasper's tooth, his whole body burned in the fresh cold air. He looked doubtfully at Serena's torn jeans, at her uncombed hair that parted in the middle of her forehead, over the new, livid bruise. Without even reaching to touch his face, he could sense his own swollen jaw.

"Serena," he whispered. "There seems to be a party going on. It looks private, and anyway I don't think that we're dressed appropriately. Let's go back and try the youth hostel—maybe it's open after all."

Serena, ignoring his whisper, walked towards the open window. The band finished up "Slow Boat to China" and began playing "Sweet Georgia Brown."

"Serena!" he called after her. "This isn't right, I can feel it. We shouldn't be here."

The farther she moved away from him, the closer to the veranda she got, the more the weight seemed to come back upon him. His tooth was twanging wildly now, like a dowser's rod, in time to the beat of the music, the chiming of the silverware. He ran after her.

Three of them met in the doorway: Serena, Jasper, and a tall man in all black, with a fierce, bristling black beard.

"So you've finally made it," said the man. His clothes were old-fashioned, and he smelled musty, like an old book. He smiled merrily at them, and his lips in the black beard were cherry red. "We were beginning to think you'd given up."

"Were you expecting us?" Jasper mumbled.

"Of course," the man said, still smiling. The young lady was most insistent we make room for you both when she called last night."

Serena both said happily, "You do have a room available?"

"We were able to arrange something," the man said. "But you must come in, out of this chill. My name is Mr. Connor."

"I'm Serena Silkert, and this is Jasper Todd," Serena said. Mr. Connor shook hands with them. His clasp was neither firm nor limp, neither warm

nor cold, but Jasper jerked his hand back as if he had touched a live coal, or an eel.

They passed from the shadow of the veranda into the room full of people. At that instant, the music suddenly broke off. The silence was perfect. No heel scuffed at the dance floor, no glass lifted, no whisper rustled between tables. Only faintly could Jasper hear a hungry gulp and crackle; it came from across the room.

"It's time for the musician's break," said Mr. Connor. "They'll play for us again later."

The room was longer than it was wide, with two great fireplaces lit across from the door that Serena and Jasper and Mr. Connor entered. From the fireplaces came the feasting noise; gradually other small noises sprang up among the tables.

There were dim chandeliers, and candles upon the tables, but a wind passing down the room had blown most of them out. Dancers now returning to their tables brushed past the three. These dancers, like the people sitting down to dinner, were difficult to see in the almost dark, but they appeared to be dressed in a great variety of costumes. One man who passed by Jasper smiled; his teeth were filed down to sharp points. Some of the guests were reed-slender and some were grotesquely corpulent. The firelight exaggerated their silhouettes. All that Jasper saw had ruddy, glowing cheeks and bright, bright eyes.

"Is this a fancy dress party?" Jasper said at the same time Serena said, "You're American, aren't you, Mr. Connor?"

"Yes and no to both questions," he said. He looked at each of them in turn, his eyes lingering on Jasper's jaw, on Serena's forehead. "First, why don't both of you go and freshen up. You're looking a bit shopworn."

"Anna will show you where to sign the register, and then take you to your room." He nodded to a small, fluffy-haired girl who came up to them.

Without a word, she led them through a confusion of corridors and staircases. They ended up in a hallway where none of the doors had numbers, and she opened the very last with a small, tarnished key. Then Anna handed the key to Serena. She receded back down the corridor, walking back-

wards, staring at Jasper and Serena avidly. The last they saw of her, like the Cheshire Cat, were her eyes, burning in the dim light. Then they winked out, like two candles blown out in a sudden gust.

"She was odd," Serena said as they went into their room. "Oops, I forgot. You like quiet women."

Jasper looked around the room. The ceiling sloped toward the floor, and the double bed sunk in the middle like a collapsed wedding cake. There were no windows. "This whole place is odd," he said. "Where do you suppose the bathroom is?"

"Down the hall," Serena said. "Go and try doors until you find one that opens. I'm going to get my pack out of the car. Do you want anything?"

"I'm wearing my nicest pants now," he said. "Will you be able to find your way down and back again?"

"I'm good at mazes," Serena said, and left. Jasper followed her, trying doors. The first three were all locked. Behind the fourth door, he could hear someone pacing up and down. He put his hand out towards the knob and hesitated. The footsteps stopped directly before the door, and before he could back away, the door swung open. A man stood there, smoking a cigarette. A long scar ran down the left side of his face like a ragged seam.

"I was looking for the bathroom," Jasper said.

The man pointed across the hall and slammed the door. The smell of cloves lingered.

The bathroom was empty, and Jasper lifted the seat of the toilet and urinated for blissful seconds. When his bladder felt comfortably drained, he examined himself in the mirror above the stained porcelain sink. The knot on his jaw was not as noticeable as he'd feared, but, when he tried to say ah, he could only open his mouth to the length of a finger joint. His tooth was very bad, and he fished four aspirin out of his pocket and swallowed them with care. The cold water made him swear irritably.

Then he wet his hair, combed it back, and went to the room. He left the key on the bed for Serena. He shut the door halfway.

He followed the sound of the band, which had begun playing again, back to the dining room. There was a table newly laid for two in front of one of the fireplaces, and he sat down with his back to the fire. He saw Mr. Connor near the front of the

room, dancing with a stout woman in red.

The fire behind him threw up bloody shadows on the wall and on the faces of the diners around him. He could feel its heat beating at the back of his head, pushing at the icy wall of air that bisected him neatly. His hands remained two curled, numb peninsulas, but his heels and shoulders glowed as circulation returned.

The snap of the fire lulled even as the cold at his face kept his eyes propped open and plucked at his bad jaw. He thought of going up to the tiny bedroom again, but there would be the same discomfort there: the damp, cool sheets, and between them the sticky warmth of Serena. He thought of the white, eyeless walls and shuddered. It was preferable to sit here, between the fireplace and the open windows. Here at least, Serena would stay on the other side of the table, and he would look past her to where a peak loomed in the window. It was slender and jagged, like a broken-off blade, or a ground-down incisor. It sparkled halfway down the slope.

He saw that the others around him were intently watching the doors, and the moving lights.

Men came through a service door between the two fireplaces and began arranging another table. They set one, two, seven places. Jasper looked back to the mountain. He counted seven lights. A party of seven, then, coming late off the Track. Expected for dinner. Just as he and Serena had been expected.

Serena came from the direction of the rooms, and walked towards him. She was wearing a black sweater dress and purple tights that appeared to have no holes. She had pinned up her hair and applied some makeup. Her forehead was white and unblemished, delicate under a dusting of powder.

He stood up and went to her chair. "You look wonderful," he said. It was the truth.

She let him seat her, and said bluntly, "You look like shit. Does your tooth hurt? Will you be able to eat anything?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I'd like some wine."

Mr. Connor left the dance floor and came over to them. He borrowed a chair from the newly set table, and sat down next to them.

"Is your room adequate?" he said.

"Our room is fine," said Serena.

"Mr. Connor, what sort of function is this?"

Jasper asked. "We didn't pass a single car on the way here, but the parking lot is full."

"This is the first course," said Mr. Connor. "I do hope that you are hungry."

Waiters put down bowls of a thin pink broth. They poured red wine into Serena and Jasper's glasses.

"We've learned to travel swiftly and arrive on time. And some of these," Mr. Connor nodded to the other tables, "have traveled very far to reach us tonight. I, like yourselves, am an American. Others are from much more distant parts.

"We gather annually to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit in situations of great adversity." He hesitated. "We are all travellers, survivors of great adventures, of calamitous expeditions, of tragedies.

"This is the 147th Annual Survivors' Ball."

"I've never heard of you," Jasper said. "All these people came for the ball?"

"We're expecting one more group," Mr. Connor said. "They're a little late."

"Is that why you keep the windows open?" Serena asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Connor. "We're hoping that they will hear the music and smell the good food, and find their way back down the trail without further incident."

"You're talking about the lost hikers, right?" Serena said. "Is that table for them?"

"There were twenty-three hikers," Jasper said. He linked his soup spoon against the rim of the bowl. "And what about the rescue party?"

Mr. Connor shrugged. "This isn't a happy reunion, Mr. Todd. This is the Survivors' Ball.

"Try your soup, Mr. Todd. The second course will be arriving shortly."

Jasper took a small sip of the soup. It was warm and salty, and as he swallowed, it stung at his tooth. "I prefer the wine," he said.

"Jasper has a cavity," Serena told Mr. Connor.

"He hasn't been able to eat anything solid all day."

She showed the two of them her empty soup bowl. "I'm starved."

Mr. Connor beckoned to a waiter to clear the course. "This is more than just a feast," he said. "It is a story-telling, Ms. Silkert. You did say when you called that you were a writer. We hoped you would join us. Here is the second course."

The second course was a fatty cut of mutton. There was a little dish of mint jelly, and carrots cooked with brown sugar. Steam rose up to Jasper's nose, thick and sweet-smelling. He diced up a carrot and ate it with his spoon. "I'm really not that hungry," he said politely.

"Mr. Connor," Serena said. "When I spoke to you on the phone, you didn't mention that this was a ball. We really shouldn't be here. We aren't great travellers, or anything special. Our story isn't very exciting."

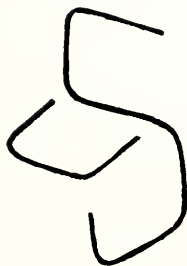
The red lips parted in the black, black beard. "You're here now," they said. "Perseverance is the mark of a survivor. And you said you were a writer. Writers

should know to be good listeners: there's nothing we like so much as an appreciative audience. It has been a long time since an outsider heard our tales."

Jasper's wine glass was full again. He didn't remember drinking the last glass, but he had no objections. It numbed his tooth. The torches were now at the base of the mountain. They swung back and forth, lighting up the great trunk of a kauri tree here, a growth of ferns there.

He still had a sense of wrongness, an instinct that the proper thing to do would be to leave, or perhaps just go up to bed. But that would mean the tunnel again, or the small coffin-like room with its sad, sagging bed. He took another sip of wine. For courage. Dutch courage. Abel Tasman was Dutch. Then again, being Dutch just might get you eaten.

There was a small monument to Tasman's expedition in Wellington. He remembered the confident face, the bronzed foot stepping perpetually and boldly forward. Jasper looked over to Connor. His expression was at once rueful and amused—knowing. Not at all bronzed, the long white forehead like parchment, the black beard



falling like a shadow upon his face. It was almost a familiar face, Jasper thought.

"Have the two of you been travelling together long?" asked Mr. Connor.

"Oh no," said Serena quickly. "We met three days ago in a bar in Queenstown. We found out that we're both from the Midwest, and we've been travelling the world in opposite direction."

"There," Mr. Connor said. "You are great travellers."

"Not really," Serena said. "I'm just trying to keep as far away from home as possible, for as long as possible. And Jasper isn't really the sort who travels purposefully. He won his trip by filling out a form in a student travel agency."

"You are a fortunate young man," Mr. Connor said to Jasper. Jasper saluted him with his wine glass. The band was now playing "Can't Get Started With You."

Jasper saw that Serena had somehow managed to clean her plate of everything except for a small smear of mint jelly. She had been talking the entire time.

"When he told me in the bar how he'd won, I thought it was just a great pick-up line," she said. "The tie-breaking question was 'Why do you want to go around the world?' And he wrote, 'Because you can't go through it.' There. Isn't that ridiculous?"

"It's true," Jasper asserted. He was very careful to enunciate. "Sad, but true."

Serena smiled at him. "I shouldn't complain, though. It's great travelling with Jasper. He's

loaded, so he pays for everything. Thanks, Jasper," she said.

"Don't mention it," said Jasper. He wanted to say something, to explain that travel was important to him, that he had the sense that someday if he traveled far enough he would eventually come to a wonderful, to a magical place. His toothache was gone, just a small itch very far away.

He looked past Serena, to the door which was now full of light. Full of lights.

"Look," said Mr. Connor, "here are the late-comers at last. Just in time for dessert."

The whole room rose from their chairs, applauding. Six men and one woman came into the dining room. They stopped just past the threshold, as if uncertain of their welcome. They looked longingly at the fireplaces, at the empty plates piled up on dirty tables, but they made no move forward. Instead the crowd swept towards them, journeying in a great hubbub and commotion.

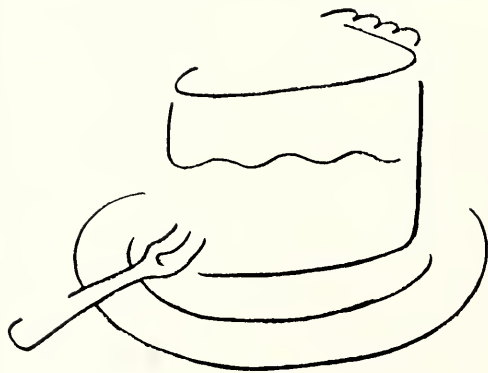
"Where are the other hikers?" Jasper said quietly.

Mr. Connor was no longer applauding. He was biting savagely at his thumb, frowning down at the linen table-cloth. "Sometimes," he said, "People do unthinkable things, in order to come home safely. Impossible, marvelous things. Did you know that the first class passengers on the Titanic were the first to be put on the lifeboats? Women and children, yes, but the women and children in first class. There was one, a Mrs. G——, who chose to stay with her husband of forty years, a New York magnate. You may be sure there were others who took her place.

"Mrs. G—— is not here tonight," Connor said. "There is another who will sit where she chose not to."

Serena had left the table to greet the seven hikers, carrying with her Jasper's pen and her little notebook. The French windows were closed now—the trekkers were cut off from the trail and the mountain, should they wish to go back. The fire behind Jasper was flickering low, casting out more shadow than warmth, and yet the room seemed to grow hotter and hotter.

His tooth no longer hurt; the wine and the music were pleasant. "I can tell you're a good man,



Connor. Otherwise my tooth would warn me. It's becoming a sixth sense." Jasper said.

"The name Connor is familiar," he said. "But not quite right."

He could no longer see Serena. She had been completely swallowed up by the crowd.

"Perhaps you misheard it," said the bearded man.

He smiled his merry smile at Jasper. "I have seen snow and I have felt hunger, and I have seen nothing in all my travels that is so bad as not living. I propose a toast, Mr. Todd."

They both raised their glasses. "To Travel," one said.

"To Life," said the other.





Sylvia Wilkinson: *Untitled*, woodcut, reprinted from Arts Forum Coradli 1962

About the Judge

Fall 1993

Sylvia Wilkinson

Sylvia Wilkinson received her B.A. in English and Art from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and her M.A. in Creative Writing from Hollins College in Virginia. In addition to these two degrees, she participated in the M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing at Stanford University as a Post-Graduate Fellow. To date, six of her novels have been published, including *Cale* and *Moss on the North Side*. Her most recent novel, *On the 7th Day, God Created the Chevrolet*, was published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill in October of 1993. She is the recipient of numerous awards including the Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford, the Guggenheim Fellowship, two Sir Walter Raleigh awards for North Carolina fiction, and a UNC-Greensboro Alumnae Service Award. She has been a Writer-in-Residence at Hollins College, a Visiting Writer at Washington University, and has held teaching positions at The College of William and Mary and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In recent years, she has made her living as a timer for world champion and Indy racing teams, including those of Paul Newman, Bobby Rahal, and Al Unser, Jr. Born in Durham, North Carolina, she now lives in California.



photograph by Margot Wilkinson

Calendar of Upcoming Arts Events

Weatherspoon Art Gallery

- Form and Process: Projects from the department of Housing and Interior Design. Nov. 7 - Jan. 2
- What's in a Label?: Interactive exhibition of works and how they might be interpreted. Nov. 7 - Feb. 27
- Art on Paper: National and regional artists, and UNCG faculty. Nov. 14 - Jan. 9
- Crossings: Works by Sol LeWitt and Eva Hesse from the Weatherspoon collection. Nov. 28 - Feb. 13
- MFA Thesis Exhibition: Jan. 16 - Feb. 27
- Lecture: Discussion with Michael Brenson, former critic for the New York Times. Sun., Jan. 23 at 2pm
- Magdalena Abakanowicz: Recent sculpture. Jan. 23 - Mar. 20
- Falk Visiting Artist: Joanna Przybyla lectures: Mon., Jan. 24 at 4pm. & Tues., Jan. 25 at 8pm.

Fiction and Poetry Readings

- Rebecca Johnson and David Blair, The Exchange, Tate Street, Dec. 7, 9:30pm
- April Heck and Evan Smith, The Exchange, Tate Street, Dec. 21, 9:30pm
- Lee Smith, Alumni House, Jan. 18, 8:00pm

Theater

- Young Dick Whittington, Taylor Theatre, Dec. 4-5, 2:00pm
- City of Angels, Aycock Auditorium, Jan. 15, 8:00pm

Music

- Delphic String Trio Faculty Ensemble, Hart Recital Hall, Brown Building, Dec. 1, 8:15pm
- University Concert Band, Aycock Auditorium, Dec. 2, 8:15pm
- University Symphony Orchestra and Voice Faculty, Hart Recital Hall, Brown Building, Dec. 7, 8:15pm

Dance

- Undergraduate Concert, HHP Dance Theater, Dec. 2-4, 8:00pm
- Martha Graham Dance Company, Aycock Auditorium, Feb. 12, 8:00pm

Coraddi Deadlines

- Poetry Contest Deadline, Jan. 19
- Visual Art Contest Deadline, Mar. 18



